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BOOK EXCERPT PART

CRISIS

The Last Year of the Carter Presidency

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'Damn Ted Kennedy'

Jordan's potential breakthrough came at a low moment for White House morale. None of the sanctions invoked thus far against Iran—the seizure of Iranian assets in the United States, the cutoff of oil imports from Iran—had produced any changes in Teheran. A plea to release the hostages from U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim had not worked. A gloomy Carter said, publicly it could be months before the captive Americans came home.

The next few days brought the Carter presidential campaign a big victory over Kennedy in the Iowa caucuses, and I felt sure Kennedy would bow out of the race once the magnitude of his defeat sank in.

In a farming state, he had stood to make good mileage out of the president's grain embargo on the Russians for their invasion of Afghanistan, but he still lost 2 to 1. I was delighted, but unable to focus on politics. My thoughts kept returning to the meeting in London. The Panamanians had opened the door, but how to walk through? Moreover, could we trust the French lawyers? I called CIA Director Stansfield Turner and asked for information on Villalon and Bourguet.

Then I canceled my appointments, locked my office door and wrote President Carter. The French lawyers had persuaded me that we would have to modify our position before we could have any hope of getting the hostages out. It was possible, however, to create a mood in Iran that would lead to the release of our people while minimizing the risk to our honor. Through the French lawyers, I suggested, we could negotiate in advance some reciprocal steps to gradually satisfy both sides' demands, in a precise scenario that would be agreed to by both.

I took the five-page memo to the Oval Office, handed it to the president, and in spite of his heavy schedule, he read and returned it within the hour. In the corner he had written: "Good ideas. Discuss with Fritz [Mondale], Cy, and Zbig."

The next day, Jan. 23, the four of us gathered with the president in the Oval Office. "I assume you have all had a chance to read Ham's memo," Carter began. Everyone nodded. "For over two months we have stood firm and not agreed to any of Iran's demands until the hostages were released, and nothing has happened. We have tried since November to reach Khomeini through every possible channel, and all of a sudden these two characters appear out of nowhere who can pick up the phone and talk directly to Ghotbzadeh. Ham

has met them and is more inclined to trust them than I am, but at this point I don't see that we have any alternative to proceeding along the lines suggested in Ham's memo."

"Mr. President, I agree," Vance said simply, and was seconded by Mondale and Brzezinski. And in less than 10 minutes, the meeting was over. I wandered back to my office to reflect on what had just happened. I had argued for and won an important change in our government's position on the hostage crisis. My presentation had been largely based on faith in two people I had met only once in London. Suppose this thing is wrong, or doesn't work or compromises the president in some way, I thought. I became more and more anxious. I was operating out of my league.

I glanced at the president's daily schedule, which was taped on my desk. There were a few minutes left before his next appointment. I opened the white wooden door to the Oval Office and peeked in. Carter was working on his State of the Union speech. He looked up and smiled: "Come on in, Ham."

"Mr. President, I hope we're doing the right thing. Maybe I pushed too hard. I'm betting a lot on these guys' being able—"

The president interrupted me. "Ham, don't worry. What choice do we have? Those bastards have held our people for two months now. We've got to take some risks. You just pursue this thing aggressively and we'll see where it leads."

I stood up to leave and he went back

Jordan in disguise: 'It's great,' he told the CIA man, 'I look like a sleazy Latin businessman.'

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